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SUBJECT: HARIRI KICKS OFF CABINET CONSULTATIONS WITH  
LISTENING TOUR

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The unexpected visit of Syrian President al-Asad to Saudi Arabia and his meeting with Saudi King Abdullah was a "positive development," Nader Hariri, advisor to Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, said September 25. MP Marwan Hamadeh observed that Saad Hariri is focused on asking larger, more strategic questions during his second try at parliamentary consultations, which began September 24. MP Ibrahim Kenaan reported that his opposition Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) left the door open to any cabinet formula during its September 24 meeting with Hariri. The new round of consultations has thus far been marked by a positive atmosphere on both sides. End summary.

SYRIAN-SAUDI DYNAMICS LOOM LARGE  
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¶2. (C) The unexpected visit of Bashar al-Asad to Saudi Arabia and his meeting with King Abdullah on September 23 was a "positive development," Nader Hariri told polchief September ¶25. Nader reported that no specific information on the encounter had reached the Hariri camp, nor did they know anything about the rumored impending visit of Saudi Information Minister Abdul Aziz Khoja to Beirut. MP Ibrahim Kenaan from Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement interpreted the development differently, terming it "a pity." "If we cannot agree on our own constitutional interpretations and national strategy for at least the next two years, we will always look to a solution from outside," Kenaan told polchief. He added that Syria cannot pressure the FPM to compromise and that the nation should not be held hostage to the Syrian-Saudi relationship, which hinges on numerous regional issues much more important than Lebanon.

¶3. (C) Many "big questions" loom in the region, the answers to which will have an effect on Lebanon, Progressive Socialist (PSP) Party MP Marwan Hamadeh observed to the Ambassador and poloff during a September 25 meeting. Hamadeh, a senior advisor to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, cited specifically the outcome of the UN General Assembly's vote on nuclear proliferation, the UN Security Council's decision on whether to impose sanctions on Iran, developments in the Middle East peace negotiations, and possible renewed rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. The outcome of the encounter between al-Asad and King Abdullah could have the most impact on Lebanon of all, he added.

HARIRI LOOKS TO BIG PICTURE  
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14. (C) PM-designate Hariri, Nader told us, is focused on asking larger, more strategic questions during his second effort at parliamentary consultations, which began September 24. He said Saad is soliciting opinions from the various parliamentary blocs about the Ta'if Agreement, deconfessionalization and privatization, among other topics. The opposition parties were using the previously agreed-upon 15-10-5 formula for the government as their baseline, he assessed, although Saad was open to discussion about new formulas. Hamadeh concurred with Nader's assessment after the PSP's consultation with Hariri on September 24 and called Saad's approach more "clever." Kenaan described the FPM's discussion with the PM-designate as more positive than before, although he wondered if Saad was "buying time." Nevertheless, Kenaan explained, "we would like to build on it." Nader insisted that the preliminary consultations from September 24-29 were just an introduction and that subsequent meetings with the parliamentary blocs would address the serious issues of portfolios, ministerial candidates and the cabinet formula.

15. (C) The FPM left the door open to any cabinet formula during its consultation with Hariri, Kenaan reported. Hariri had raised the possibility of a government composed of political leaders, echoing caretaker Finance Minister Mohammed Chatah's floating of the option to Kenaan two weeks before. On both occasions, Kenaan claimed, Michel Aoun replied that he was willing to consider the idea. For his part, Hamadeh was convinced that the final government formulation would be some hybrid between political leaders and technocrats, although he acknowledged that while a hybrid formula might facilitate the formation of a cabinet, it would

not be the most effective body. A cabinet that included political leaders -- especially Christian representatives Samir Geagea, Amine Gemayel and Aoun -- would erode the power of Maronite President Michel Sleiman, he explained.

16. (C) Hamadeh said the PSP gave PM-designate Hariri its support to move forward with a formula of his choosing and did not expect that the party would participate in another consultation. Meanwhile, Kenaan expected the FPM to have additional meetings with Hariri before an agreement could be reached, since they discussed no tangible issues like portfolios during their September 24 consultation. Hamadeh believed that the constitutionally-mandated opening of parliament, scheduled for October 20, would act as an impetus for government formation. The parliament must open, he analyzed, not only because of the law, but also because Speaker Nabih Berri's political relevance would be threatened if Hizballah's domination over the opposition were to be revealed to all.

17. (C) COMMENT: In the absence of clarity on the direction of cabinet formation and the impact of possible renewed Syrian-Saudi rapprochement on Lebanese politics, the salons of Beirut have become echo chambers. Nevertheless, the renewal of consultations has thus far been marked by an unexpected thoughtfulness and positive atmosphere on both sides.

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